

textura

Timothy Schwarz: *The Living American* Albany Records



On his fifth album as a leader, violinist Timothy Schwarz asks, “What are the musical characteristics that make a piece sound ‘American’?” His answer is compelling: acknowledging the incredible diversity of his country, the works he performs—all by living American composers, of course—are as wide-ranging in style and scope as the people who call the country home. Some of the composers carry forward the work of their predecessors; those not born in America but who now call it home enrich their material with external influences. Still others consciously fuse elements from multiple genres to produce new hybrids. The result is a recording as encompassing and rich as the country of which it's a musical portrait. Listening to *The Living American* might be likened to the experience of walking through the different neighbourhoods of a major city, with jazz or classical playing here and Indian ragas there.

If anyone's equipped to take on such a project, it's Schwarz. Currently Head of Strings at Rowan University in New Jersey and Visiting Professor of Performance at the London College of Music, the violinist made his solo debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the ripe age of nine and in the years since has established himself as a performer, recording artist, and, obviously, educator. He's long explored the American experience in his work, *The Living American* arriving almost three decades after his 1995 debut album *An American Affair*. Schwarz also helped spread the word about American music to numerous foreign countries in his role as an Artistic Ambassador for the United States from 1996 to 2001.

It's noteworthy that of the seven composers represented, three are women, Jennifer Higdon, Jessie Montgomery, and Reena Esmail. Whereas the Pulitzer Prize- and three-time Grammy-winning Higdon might be regarded as the quintessential native living American composer of those included, Esmail's as representative of composers who combine elements from different cultures, in her case aspects of Indian and Western classical music.

It might also be noted that Schwarz performs three pieces alone but partners with pianist Charles Abramovic on the other four; they, in turn, are augmented on Denis DeBlasio's *Australian Sketches* by double bassist Douglas Mapp and drummer Doug Hirlinger.

Schwarz's choice of Steven Sametz's *Fantasia on Lama Badaa yatasana (When He Was Bending)* as the album opener was smart, given how much the violinist's nearly ten-minute solo performance dazzles—calling it a tour de force is in no way excessive. Based on a traditional Arab love song from over 500 years ago, the piece presents eight variations on the song's melody and makes considerable demands on the soloist's virtuosity. Spiccato, double-stops, trills, glissandi, pizzicato, and more work their way into an intense, rhapsodic performance whose tonalities and techniques mesmerize from start to finish.

Higdon's evocative “Blue Hills of Mist,” the atmospheric central part of her five-movement work *String Poetic*, captivates too, starting with the combination of plucked piano strings and conventionally played notes at its start and the contemplative dialogue between the violin and piano that follows. Montgomery's represented by *Rhapsody No. 2*, inspired in part by Bartók and the second in a set of six intended solo violin works. An echo of the Hungarian composer is certainly detectable in the folk tinges that seep into the material and the supplicating expressiveness of the writing. An album highlight is Schwarz's rapturous essaying of Esmail's “Raag Charukeshi,” the third movement from a work, *Darshan*, designed to explore grief in its multiple facets and forms. Like Esmail, Avner Dorman, an Israel native living in the United States, integrates a variety of cultural influences into his writing, the *Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano* an illustration. At twelve minutes the album's longest piece, the performance affords Schwarz and Abramovic ample opportunity to explore a range of moods, from pensive and brooding to aggressive and even violent.

Certainly two of the set's most striking pieces are those by musical theatre composer/pianist Joseph Goodrich and jazz saxophonist/flutist and educator Denis DeBlasio, each composer's material irreverent in its incorporation of jazz and blues forms. With the violinist ably supported by Abramovic, Goodrich's *C-Minor Jam* and *The Machine* add bluesy swing and percussive animation to the release, respectively. Interestingly, his third piece, *Lacrimosa*, also uses “Lama badaa yatasana” as a springboard for a rhapsodic and sometimes mournful treatment. DeBlasio's five-part *Australian Sketches* extends from the sweetly singing “Little Buggars” and breezy “Cleansing Ale” to the dreamy reverie “Endless Harbor” and rhythmically insistent “Uluru,” the inclusion of Mapp and Hirlinger doing much to bolster the concluding work's drive. That *The Living American* opens with Sametz's commanding meditation and ends with DeBlasio's vibrant sketches clearly testifies to the breadth of the material featured on the seventy-minute release.

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